

# France: The NPA in Crisis

Sunday 15 January 2012, by [Collective / Multiple signers](#), [RAO Nathan](#), [STANLEY Jason](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2012).

**We reproduce here both the article of Jason Stanley and the readers' comments, which opening elements of reflection on the roots of the present NPA crisis with substantial contribution to the discussion, namely by Nathan Rao.**

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FRANCE'S NEW ANTI-CAPITALIST Party (NPA) is in crisis. While only two years ago many on the international left talked about the NPA as one of the brightest lights on an otherwise dim revolutionary horizon, today the Party is hemorrhaging members and struggling to stay afloat.

## Jason Stanley

Founded in 2009, the NPA brought together members of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR) and a number of diffuse anti-capitalist, anti-globalization and identity-based movements in France. Whereas the LCR had been a party that sprouted from the fertile terrain of the May 1968 moment, the NPA was to be a party of the new, post-Berlin Wall left.

Some on the revolutionary left had doubts about the move away from explicitly socialist, Marxist politics, towards something more in line with the broad global justice movement. Yet growth and momentum — at least apparent momentum — brushed those concerns aside.

At its founding convention, the NPA had 9,123 members spread over 467 local branches. Approximately 5,900 members participated in the Party's local congresses leading up to its national congress.

All this promised a level of commitment and dynamism to be reckoned with. Even before the NPA was founded, many on the left felt that a window had opened for revolutionary politics. In 2002, the LCR's candidate in the country's Presidential election, Olivier Besancenot (later to become the NPA's Presidential candidate), received 4.25% of the national vote, while a second revolutionary party (Workers' Struggle) scored 5.72%.

This was better than either party had ever performed in a national election and, significantly, each of the two revolutionary parties had out-competed the long dominant and often stifling French Communist Party (PCF).

Five years later, in the 2007 Presidential election, Besancenot tallied 4.08% of the vote, outdistancing the PCF by an even larger margin. Coupled with a political climate that gave rise to large-scale social mobilizations that won key victories against neoliberal attacks, this appeared to be a special moment.

Yet only two years after the NPA's founding congress, the Party looks to be on life support. By early

2011, it had lost over one-third of its members. Eight months later, activists close to the Party suggest numbers had continued to decline precipitously. Perhaps more importantly, the sense of hope and dynamism that pervaded the Party in 2009 has been displaced by disappointment and shock.

## **Shifting Majorities**

The immediate crisis in the NPA was precipitated by a subtle but important shift in support among members for one strategic direction over another. In 2009, party members voted in favor of a leadership slate (including eventual Presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot) that supported guarded electoral engagement with a newly formed political coalition — the Left Front — that had uncomfortably close ties to the social-liberal Socialist Party.

One segment of the NPA membership wanted the Party to more fully cooperate with the Left Front to build a broad anti-capitalist coalition. Another segment wanted just the opposite — a turn away from emphasis on electoral activity, and specifically away from the wishy-washy Left Front, towards a concerted effort to build a party committed to revolution. The slate that won offered a compromise between these two positions.

This compromise held until 2011, when a new leadership vote tipped slightly in favor of those opposed to engagement with the Left Front. For those on the winning side, the Left Front offered a reformist lure that was sure to undermine revolutionary politics. This meant that the best strategy was to dig in for the long haul, slowly building the Party through a difficult conjuncture.

Yet for many of those who favored some form of unity with the Left Front, this shift was the straw that broke the camel's back. The strategy of guarded engagement pursued between 2009 and 2011 had rarely offered enough left unity to satisfy these members, yet it had at least offered enough engagement to keep alive hope for greater unity in the future. By contrast, the 2011 shift signaled a turn towards isolation and sectarianism. Consequently, a number of leaders and members stormed out of the Party, publicly chastising it on the way.

This fracture has taken a considerable toll on the NPA in recent months. Yet a close look at the Party's brief history suggests that other challenges have been festering for some time.

## **Personalization of the Party**

In May 2011, Olivier Besancenot stepped aside as the NPA's Presidential candidate and spokesperson, leaving a gaping hole for the party. Besancenot inferred his decision should come as no surprise, as he had repeatedly said that the party needed to regularly replace its spokespersons in order to avoid over-identification with and over-dependence on individual personalities.

Yet over-personalization and over-dependence was precisely what had occurred over the two years preceding his decision to step aside. For many in France, Besancenot was the NPA. On the surface, this was driven by the media's practice of identifying a single channel to which it could turn for positions from the party. More generally, a cult of personality had arisen in French party politics since 1962 when the position of president was opened up to direct universal suffrage, granting it greater legitimacy and power than had been the case previously.

Yet, if the political environment made an over-personalization of party politics difficult to avoid, the NPA itself did little to deflect attention away from Besancenot. A young, hip, passionate, and eloquent spokesperson, Besancenot had become a media darling. He enjoyed more press attention than the revolutionary left had ever seen (so much so that some on the broader left were suspicious that economic and political elites on the right were pulling media strings in ways to legitimize the far

left just enough to fracture the overall left's vote share).

This media attention was tantalizing for the NPA. Here was an opportunity to broadcast a well-spoken and well-defended revolutionary politics to a national — not even international — audience at a time when the global economy was in crisis and an angry population was looking for new paths forward. Besancenot was regularly invited for interviews and debates on media programs previously dominated by the most mainstream of political elites. What was not to love about this newfound spotlight?

The over-identification of the NPA with Besancenot created two challenges for the party. First, it raised questions over how the NPA would proceed once Besancenot stepped down, as he'd promised he would.

Many have looked to the party's two new spokespersons new presidential candidate to fill this void, yet the media has found them less compelling. Members and leaders alike agree that the over-personalization of the party was dangerous, but the sense of disappointment in the loss of Besancenot's charm is still palpable.

The second challenging effect of Besancenot's fame was the impact it had on recruitment. Widespread media attention meant that it was increasingly common for new members to have come across the party and its politics on television or in a newspaper, rather than in interaction with activists in social movements or trade unions.

This brought many new recruits who identified with some element of the party's message but had little or no experience with the challenging work of building movements over the long term. The churn in membership increased as more and more recruits came to the party through these channels, only to leave not long after.

Recruitment was also affected by the particular kind of revolutionary politics on display in Besancenot's media engagements. He spoke often of protest, disobedience, the need for a general strike, and the importance of revolution — in short, his message was overwhelmingly one of insurrection, and often had a tone of impatience.

Consequently, those who came to the Party upon identifying with its public message were sometimes difficult to retain once it became clear that mass disruption was either not on the agenda or not effective in turning back the attacks, as in the mobilization against pension cuts in 2010 [1].

## **Seeds of Sectarianism**

For some who recently left the party, the turn away from any electoral engagement with the Left Front represents an intensification of a sectarian tendency that was already present in the latter days of the LCR's history and that has remained a factor since the founding of the NPA.

Among the various groups on the far left of French politics, the LCR had long had a reputation for non-sectarian work, yet there were signs that this orientation was under threat by the early 2000s.

The LCR's actions in the wake of the 2005 campaign against the proposed constitutional treaty for the European Union offer a good example. Much to the surprise of political elites on both the right and center-left, the proposed treaty provoked enormous opposition from trade unions, anti-neoliberal organizations, social movements, and all political parties to the left of the Socialist Party. The far right similarly mobilized to block the treaty, but the "No" campaign was overwhelmingly constituted and driven by the left.

One of the most exciting aspects of the campaign was the appearance of roughly 1,000 “unity committees” in communities throughout the country, bringing together activists from a range of unions, movements, and parties, and attracting large numbers of citizens with little experience in organized politics. These committees gave the campaign a motor that no party or union had control over. They also made possible genuine cross-party and cross-union bridges on the left [2].

In the wake of the victory of the No campaign, the potential for left unity was abundant. Yet it took only months for much of this potential to fizzle away as the LCR pulled back from efforts towards left unity, leaving little counter-weight to the overly controlling French Communist Party (PCF). It surprised few, though still disappointed many, when the PCF pushed to take over and run the local unity committees. The energy and dynamism of the committees soon dissipated, and any hope of building upon the nascent anti-capitalist unity evident in these committees dissolved.

The hubris that grew out of the LCR’s electoral successes in the early 2000s no doubt played a role in these decisions. In both 2002 and 2007, the Trotskyist left had outscored the long-dominant PCF in Presidential elections. In 2002, a second revolutionary party (Lutte Ouvrière, “Workers’ Struggle”) had done just as well as the LCR, but by 2007 the LCR stood out as the party of choice for the majority of voters to the left of the social-liberal Socialist Party.

The PCF still had a sizeable membership of older activists, but party obituaries appeared by the hundredfold — this was a party on the verge of extinction. Why seek unity with a collapsing dinosaur? Instead, the LCR saw itself as a pole to which an anti-capitalist left would gravitate, even as it understood the need to create a new political vehicle that appealed to a new generation of global and social justice activists.

It was from these circumstances that the NPA sprouted. Yet just as the NPA was created, France saw the rise of a new political formation, also to the left of the Socialist Party. The Left Front brought together the newly created Left Party, the French Communist Party, and smaller groups of activists in favor of left unity, including some who had split from the LCR.

At times, the NPA has engaged with the Left Front constructively, especially in parts of the country where regional committees are more open to unity work and where Left Front committees are more openly opposed to cooperation with the Socialist Party. Yet the NPA’s overall approach towards the coalition has been to treat it as little different from the Socialist Party itself.

While the NPA and the Left Front have political platforms that are virtually indistinguishable, the NPA has refused almost all efforts towards common electoral work unless and until the Left Front agrees to promise that it won’t, under any eventuality, cooperate with the Socialist Party in governing. Seeing such a promise about an unpredictable future as unreasonable and unrealistic, the Left Front has refused to meet the NPA’s condition, even as it continues to urge the NPA to consider unity a priority.

In the meantime, the NPA has continued to act as if it is the natural pole to which activists and voters to the left of the Socialist Party will gravitate. Each election since the founding of the NPA has suggested that this is not the case, while the ongoing departure of the Party’s own members and leaders suggests it will not likely be the case in the future.

No one can say for sure what the future holds for the NPA, but for now the hope and dynamism of the party seems to have all but disappeared.

**Jason Stanley**

*Notes*

1. Stanley, Jason (2011) "France: Battling over pensions," Against the Current, #151 (March-April), available at: <http://solidarity-us.org/current/node/3198>.
2. Wolfreys, Jim (2005) "How France's referendum caught fire," International Socialism, No. 107, available at: <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=121&issue=107>.

## Comments

### hi, i'm starting a blog about

Submitted by red fellows (not verified) on January 4, 2012 - 3:38pm.

hi, i'm starting a blog about left political concerns (redfellows.wordpress.com) and would like to reproduce the article, with your permission.

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### Hubris and sectarianism?

Submitted by Nathan Rao (not verified) on January 4, 2012 - 7:28pm.

Thanks for this piece on one of the most interesting and important radical-Left political projects of the past few years. There are too few pieces in English about the NPA and its often complex internal debates.

The author identifies a number of real problems but the comments about the "hubris" and "sectarianism" of the latter-day LCR and then of the NPA itself are unfair and tend to simply repeat the arguments put forward by the Left Front, with which the author clearly identifies very strongly.

And yet for the anti-capitalist Left, the matter of refusing to "cooperate with the Socialist Party in governing" is indeed of decisive importance. The author apparently supports governing alongside the neoliberal SP, as the Left Front now does in various local governments. I personally think such an approach is misguided; more importantly, however, it would be useful for English-language readers to understand that there may be something more than "hubris" and "sectarianism" behind the huge majority of NPAers (including many or most of those who have left the party) being strongly opposed to such cooperation.

In fact, this defiant attitude toward the SP — which carried out the Thatcherite turn in France and governed the country for long stretches of time including as recently as 1997-2002 — was essential for sustaining social-movement resistance to neoliberalism in France and opening up the political space for the launching of the NPA, which the author correctly points out emerged out of an extended, democratic and dynamic constituent process (unlike the Left Party and Left Front, created overnight by a handful of breakaway PS heavyweights).

The question of the PCF also fits in here. For the LCR and NPA, it wasn't and isn't really about the age of PCF party members or its declining election results, as the author says. These are merely symptoms of the bigger problem: the PCF increasingly exists solely as an apparatus based on elected officials and others with a presence in state or para-state bodies; who in turn depend massively on alliances with the (increasingly neoliberalized, it bears repeating) SP in order to retain these

institutional positions.

It is essential to keep this in mind when looking at what happened following the successful experience of the 2005 campaign against the EU constitution. The author blames the LCR for killing unity by refusing to be a “counterweight” to the PCF. But, in the run-up to the 2007 presidential and legislative elections, there was no shaking the PCF away from its strategic-institutional alliance with the PS. A number of those who had the author’s “pox on both your houses” approach to the PCF and the LCR back in 2007 threw their support behind the anti-globalization and ecologist activist José Bové, but he too quickly joined the orbit of the SP and is now part of the Europe Écologie/Les Verts alliance with the SP. Is this really where the anti-capitalist Left should be in the context of the crisis and the austerity agenda being implemented by the SP’s sister parties across Europe?

Finally, though centrally important, it’s not true that the position on a government alliance with the SP is the only condition preventing the NPA from supporting the Left Front. It also has a lot to do with the Left Front’s unilateral and non-negotiable decision to impose the former Mitterrand minister and PS senator Jean-Luc Mélenchon as its presidential candidate. The author has legitimate concerns about the “personalization” of the NPA around Olivier Besancenot, but it’s a little odd that he says nothing about the overbearing Mélenchon.

**Nathan Rao**

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Submitted by **Dianne** on January 4, 2012 - 10:25pm.

Red Fellows—you are free to reproduce this article on the NPA, or other articles, but let readers know where they came from. You might also want to reproduce comments, such as the one from Nathan Rao, above,

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### **An assessment that’s only skin deep**

Submitted by **Steve Bloom** (not verified) on January 5, 2012 - 7:28am.

Jason Stanley does an important service, alerting readers of ATC to the crisis in the French NPA. Unfortunately, however, his assessment is only skin deep. I will be suggesting to the editors that they run a reply, either by me or by comrades in France who have a different take on developments. Two brief points for now:

\* It was reasonable, when the NPA was formed, to try to build a broad formation in France which might capitalize on the “window [that] had opened for revolutionary politics” which Stanley refers to. However, if the NPA itself was not going to promote “explicitly socialist, Marxist politics,” then some current had to be maintained within the new party that would do so. Otherwise the window that had opened would not look out over a revolutionary prospect. It would, instead, simply open up to “something more in line with the broad global justice movement.” Yet how to undertake this small task, of maintaining a commitment to explicitly socialist, Marxist politics, was left unaddressed by the leading cadre of the former LCR when they dissolved their organization and helped found the NPA.

\* The NPA was created with an expectation of immediate and dramatic electoral success. The leadership of the former LCR based its approach on a theory that was held more broadly in the Fourth International: The dramatic shift of Stalinist and Social Democratic parties in Europe to the right in the context of neoliberalism had opened up a new left electoral space, a space revolutionaries might be able to fill if they set their “explicitly socialist, Marxist politics” aside and put a priority on building “broad left” parties. Something important was missing from this analysis, however, because it isn’t simply the Stalinist and Social Democratic parties that have been moving to the right. It’s the entire bourgeois electoral discourse. The “space” that the NPA was supposed to expand and fill turned out to be much more limited and the initial hopes of an electoral breakthrough were quickly dashed. This is what constitutes the heart and soul of the NPA’s crisis: not so much the relatively modest electoral results, but the fact that these results followed so closely on the heels of the initial, exaggerated expectations.

Stanley’s analysis remains, unfortunately, limited by the electoralist conception of the NPA and its tasks. He even suggests that any effort to shift away from this, to focus more on the question of the class struggle in France, is “sectarianism.” This weakness in his article is evident from his consistent calls for “unity” on the left, since the only kind of “unity” this might possibly refer to is a common electoral front. For revolutionaries, however, electoral politics are not an end in themselves, but a means to the development of the class struggle. From this point of view it is not sectarianism to reject any electoral alliance that might end up in a common pro-capitalist government formed in the future by the French SP. This question of maintaining the independence of revolutionaries from any such reformist government is, in fact, one holdover from the explicitly socialist, Marxist politics of the former LCR that has been maintained. It remains a positive feature of the NPA that this is maintained, even in the context of the party’s current crisis.

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## **Response to Steve Bloom**

Submitted by Nathan Rao (not verified) on January 5, 2012 - 8:56am.

It looks like everyone is trying to get their pound of flesh out of the crisis in the NPA.

I generally agree with Steve Bloom’s critique of the Jason Stanley piece — ie. that “Stanley’s analysis remains, unfortunately, limited by the electoralist conception of the NPA and its tasks.”

However, I part ways with Bloom when he argues that the NPA’s problems are due to the fact that “maintaining a commitment to explicitly socialist, Marxist politics, was left unaddressed by the leading cadre of the former LCR when they dissolved their organization and helped found the NPA.” Or when Bloom says that “This is what constitutes the heart and soul of the NPA’s crisis: not so much the relatively modest electoral results, but the fact that these results followed so closely on the heels of the initial, exaggerated expectations.”

It would be interesting to hear Bloom explain what was (or is) so “unsocialist” and “unMarxist” about the NPA. Anyone (but the most dogmatic nitpicker, I suppose) who is familiar with the NPA’s activities, publications, public profile and internal debates would be hard pressed to make such accusations. For heaven’s sake, in his most recent interview with mainstream media the prospective NPA presidential candidate Philippe Poitou (an autoworker, who neither Stanley nor Bloom mention for some reason) said that the ideal form of government would be based on soviets (!). (While such declarations have a lot to do with the specific background of Poitou himself, if anything the NPA’s

“failure” is that it hasn’t been able to innovate somewhat more around these and other questions.)

Yes, there was an expectation of much better election results following the founding of the NPA in early 2009, but it would be wrong to say (as both Stanley and Bloom do) that this was the main driving force behind the formation of the new party. This does a great disservice to the serious reflection that went into the project; and to the debates that had been taking place in the LCR since as far as back as the period following the collapse of the USSR and its satellites.

The majority of the old LCR concluded that the LCR alone was insufficient to build on the convergence the party had been able to fashion — most notably around the success of the Besancenot presidential campaigns in 2002 and, especially 2007; but also in the organization’s work in the unions, social movements, etc — between the evolving project of the LCR and the emergence of broader sectors of struggle and opinion that were in open defiance of the neoliberal PS and those forces in its orbit (such as the PCF and the Greens)...all the while recognizing that the project and organizations of the post-68 revolutionary Left had failed and were in need of a major rethink and overhaul.

It was like walking on a strategic tightrope, but that part of the NPA project remains even more valid now than it was in 2009 — which was in the early days of the present crisis and before the Arab revolutions and the rise of the Occupy and Indignados movements.

It’s true that the emergence of Mélenchon’s Left Party and then the Left Front with the PCF (initiatives whose overnight creation was rapidly accelerated by the success of the NPA, by the way) created immediate and unexpected tactical difficulties for the NPA. As the crisis hit, struggles receded and the Sarkozy government went on the attack, an important chunk of opinions favourable to the NPA opted to park their support with the Left Front (electoralist) project that seemed more “realistic” in the short-term; and the NPA started to be seen as spoiling this electoral unity of forces to the left of the PS. The NPA didn’t always handle tactics around this difficult situation very well.

But there are much bigger questions at play than either Bloom or Stanley have cared to examine. ANY radical-Left project born in the present context will be confronted with some basic problems, a kind of “glass ceiling” if you wish: so long as capitalist elites and the right-wing remain on the offensive in a context of deep crisis, and so long as hope and a credible project for political and social transformation remain as weak as they are in today’s world, not everyone will, but huge segments of broadly left-wing and working-class people will continue to turn to those seen as the “lesser evil” when it comes to making important choices at election time or in terms of which leaderships to look to within social movements and trade unions.

The NPA has been a precious, open and democratic framework for trying to tackle this two-fold problem (“short-term tactical” and “long-term strategic/historic”). The need to crack this nut is not going to go away any time soon, and we shouldn’t let the specific short-term problems created by France’s very centralized political life and unfair electoral system bother us too much. In any case, ensuring Poitou gets to run in this year’s presidential race is an essential immediate task. They’ve almost got the 500 signatures of elected officials that they need, but it won’t be easy to get the rest.

Barring some new and deeper crisis in and around the NPA, supporters of the original project will be well placed to face the new situation that follows this year’s presidential and legislative elections.

**Nathan Rao**



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## questions

Submitted by **Binh** (not verified) on January 5, 2012 - 12:19pm.

This article raises more questions than it answers. Why did one third of NPA's members leave? Are they joining the Left Front instead?

People seem to be using NPA's difficulties to vindicate their particular perspective on party building instead of really trying to think through how we can apply lessons from France to the U.S. We would be so lucky to have the NPA's problems.

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## Why did they go and where?

Submitted by Nathan Rao (not verified) on January 13, 2012 - 8:08am.

I can provide a mostly "formal" answer to Binh's question about where those who left the NPA have gone, based on the results of voting at NPA national conventions and subsequent developments. In his piece, Jason Stanley provides an outline of this but understandably doesn't go into too much detail.

At the time of the February 2011 national party gathering, about 27 percent of people voting in the preceding local party meetings (and then of delegates at the national meeting itself) supported the positions of the Convergences & Alternative (C&A) current, which was calling for closer cooperation with the Left Front. Unsatisfied with the outcome of the national gathering, the current formally left the NPA in April 2011. In June 2011, they joined the Left Front in view of supporting its 2012 presidential and legislative campaigns. C&A now exists as a grouping within the Left Front, has a website and so on.

However, it's hard to say if fully 27 percent of C&A supporters from the NPA themselves actually joined the Left Front. Based on anecdotal evidence, my sense is that many did, while a number of others remained around the edges of the NPA and have now "returned" to join the Gauche Anticapitaliste (GA) current in the NPA that formed last November (and which also allows people who are not formally members of the NPA to join). A number of former supporters of the C&A current in the NPA have probably just drifted out of the party-electoral sphere of radical-Left politics.

Two additional points (one "technical", the other more political):

1. Keep in mind that people had already started to leave the NPA before the events described above. This had to do with the disappointing election results of 2009 and 2010, but also with the internal difficulty of integrating such a large influx of people from wildly varying backgrounds into the local and national structures of a new party that was, in a sense, "playing things by ear", trying to find solutions to these challenges as it went along.

2. With this latter point in mind, one of the main difficulties the NPA has had (and any new anti-

capitalist project will have in France and everywhere else) is trying to find a workable solution (collective outlook, common activities, etc) for a membership drawn from such different backgrounds. Very generally speaking, you had (have) people with considerable experience with the “traditional” organizations of the Left and social movements; and (often younger) people with experiences in different forms of organizing and struggle or just drawn to the general message of the NPA and public image of Olivier Besancenot (a straight-talking, radical, young postal worker, not a career politician, etc.).

It would be interesting to see what portion of former NPAers now in the Left Front is drawn from the former group rather than the latter. I suspect it is much higher; and indeed that those drawn from the second group will drift away from the Left Front as well once the campaigns of 2012 are over. In other words, this is a “structural” problem within the radical Left that is not going to go away any time soon.

One of the main problems I have with the original Jason Stanley piece is that it gives short shrift to these types of problems, choosing the simpler solution of chalking the NPA’s problems up to those of attitude (“hubris”) and political orientation (“sectarianism”).

I hope my comments provide the beginnings of a more complex understanding of the difficulties facing the NPA (and all of us on the anti-capitalist Left).

**Nathan Rao**

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## **Decline started**

Submitted by Jacob Richter (not verified) on January 6, 2012 - 11:30am.

I think the decline started when the NPA refused to work with Melenchon and co. during the EU elections. Here’s a situation where working together wouldn’t have costed much, yet this opportunity was refused.

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## **EU elections in 2009**

Submitted by Nathan Rao (not verified) on January 6, 2012 - 1:13pm.

True, the NPA could have negotiated an agreement for the EU elections in March 2009 on relatively favourable terms, given the context (semi-insurrectionary general strike in Guadeloupe and a recent powerful protest movement in France proper; massive popularity of Olivier Besancenot and tremendous momentum for the newly founded NPA) and that no governmental responsibilities would have flowed from getting members in the EU parliament. The minority Gauche anticapitaliste current (“Anti-Capitalist Left”) — formally founded at a conference last November — has identified this as a major tactical error.

On the other hand, it’s not clear that this tactical choice would have solved all the other problems the NPA had to deal with. Regional elections one year later (March 2010) raised the same issues once again, but in far more complicated ways given the less favourable context and the fact that the

contest did indeed involve the Left Front joining or supporting PS-led regional governments. And then of course the big circus leading to this year's presidential and legislative elections began soon after; in an even more deteriorated context (defeat of the movement around pension rights; massive EU-wide austerity offensive) and with even more unsavoury Left Front jockeying for institutional positions within a likely PS-led dispensation.

A different NPA position on the 2009 EU elections may have placed it on a somewhat stronger footing to deal with all this, but I don't think it would have fundamentally altered things. So defining those choices as a kind of "original sin" is wrongheaded.

In any case, everyone in this exchange is giving too much importance to the purely electoral/tactical side of the difficult situation in which the NPA found (and finds) itself). Really, the question is: How in the present context do you sustain a radical-Left organization of thousands of members from different backgrounds, where the capitalist crisis and offensive continue unabated; resistance is scattered and uneven; and prospects for social transformation are weak. Put simply, how to build a revolutionary organization in decidedly non-revolutionary times? (Tiny propaganda groups can solve this problem fairly easily with manifestos, reading groups and the occasional public action, but it's another matter when you actually have visibility and responsibility in the broader society.)

As I said earlier, the strategic gamble behind the NPA was that no such project could be built and sustained without — on the important matter of holding the reins of capitalist government — maintaining very strict independence from the thoroughly neoliberalized SP and those whose apparatuses have become utterly dependent upon it. There is no avoiding this question, and those who think they have found the answer in casting the SP in the mould of the "traditional social-democratic parties of the working class" should take a somewhat closer look at what it has become; not to mention a closer look at exactly how government and the state work under capitalism today.

At the same time, it was clear that the far-Left parties of the post-68 period had failed or at least irreversibly run up against their limits and that, in any case, there had been for quite some time a strong need for a kind of generational passing-of-the-batons from the 1968 crowd to those of us who have come after (I'm in my mid-40s, on the slightly older edge of many of those in the core of the former LCR who drove the NPA project forward).

Just to return slightly to the question of electoral politics: In his piece, Jason Stanley makes a very insightful comment about how one could easily conclude from Besancenot's media appearances that the only strategy he had was one of repeated calls for general strikes and "insurrection" (as Stanley says).

While the internal discussions on strategy within the LCR and then the NPA were slightly more complex and involved than this (!), it's true that there is a specific and key difficulty around the matter of electoral politics and "governmental formulae" for radical-Left organizations that have crossed a certain threshold in terms of size and influence but who remain relatively marginal and find themselves in a context of general social retreat and demobilization.

Here, while there is broad agreement about the need for the NPA to be present in electoral contests, and around what I said above about the PS etc, the NPA is definitely torn in its internal debates around what importance should be given to electoral politics; and, perhaps more importantly, where elections and government fit into revolutionary strategy over the longer term.

I have views on this — closer to the NPA minority (and perhaps also to Jason Stanley) than to the current NPA majority — but this post is already far too long as it is!

**Nathan Rao**

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**Re. left unity work**

Submitted by **Jacob Richter** (not verified) on January 7, 2012 - 12:37am.

Much of what Nathan Rao said in detail I can agree with. I'd like to know what tendency he subscribes to, because it sounds like he's familiar with Mike Macnair's book on revolutionary strategy.

I'm all for cooperation at the EU level, so long as it's made clear that government responsibilities and perhaps even confidence vote support are out of the question. I'd go further and say that the NPA should campaign for the EU itself becoming a unified polity and a democratic republic.

Re. the regional elections: how much constitutional power do the regions have, or are many of the social programs administered by the national government? If they are administered nationally, then it's somewhat pointless to cooperate with the SP or its ass-kissers.

Campaigning for the legislative elections should focus on electoral reform. I'm surprised that France, despite its radical political tradition, doesn't have proportional representation.

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**P.S.**

\* From Against the Current, January/February 2012, ATC 156:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3490>